

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 14, 2005

The Honorable Mike Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to express our concern with video news releases (VNRs) and audio news releases (ANRs) distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).


USDA's Broadcast Media and Technology Center has produced 18 ANRs and 2 VNRs since March 11 that have dealt with CAFTA. Many of these releases dismiss as nonsense the very real concern held by many in American agriculture that CAFTA will negatively impact our domestic sugar industry.

For example, a radio actuality produced on April 21, 2005 characterizes the legitimate apprehension many American sugar producers have over CAFTA as "a Chicken Little sort of thing that isn't real." Another release says that CAFTA "isn't going to have any impact on the sugar producers or processors." These and other statements suggest that a lack of education about CAFTA is the real cause of sugar opposition to the agreement; they do nothing to address our belief that CAFTA, as negotiated, would begin to cause the collapse of the sugar program Congress established in the 2002 Farm Bill.

Additionally, these releases, which are produced and distributed with taxpayer dollars, are provided to 675 rural radio stations and numerous television stations where they are run, without disclosure of their source, as news reports. We are concerned that many listeners in rural America may believe these releases are objective news reports, rather than political statements from USDA which are intended to advance a specific trade agenda.

An ANR released on March 11, 2005 predicted that there would be "good, healthy debate" on CAFTA. We hope that the debate will also be respectful and open. We urge you to take seriously the concerns of our sugar producers, and we request that news releases from the Department on this issue are upfront and open about their source.

Sincerely,



DANIEL K. AKAKA
United States Senator



MARY L. LANDRIEU
United States Senator